Book Review

William Gould. *Religion and Conflict in Modern South Asia.* New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 344 pp. (ISBN 978-1-107-02921-7)

South Asia, in all its religious and political heterogeneity, has been portrayed from a comparative historical vantage point by William Gould, a historian of Leeds University, in his recent book *Religion and Conflict in Modern South Asia.* Gould has revisited the complicated history of South Asia. His topics range from the 19th century cow protection movement to the 1915 Sinhalese Muslim riots to the 1947 Partition catastrophe to contemporary upsurge of Hindu Muslim violence. He contends that peculiar community violence takes place in the region neither because of religion nor illiteracy, but rather owing to the mysterious nature of state formation and political representation of religion. Gould emphasizes three vital points to understand religion and violence in South Asia: first, there is no clear demarcation between institutions ostensibly espousing secularism and those of religio-political mobilization; second, 'Hindu-Muslim' conflict is never an uncomplicated matter of clashes of civilizations or religious outlook and one needs to examine how contexts and circumstances are negotiated by the ideological and political choices of those involved in conflict; finally, in looking at violence, one needs to move away from looking at it as an aberration, a moment of madness, to viewing it more in terms of the everyday struggles of people attempting to make sense of their predicament.

Gould demonstrates that the seeds of communal violence were sown by South Asia's colonial masters, who created 'representatives of communities' in politics through their 'divide and rule' policy in Indian society in the late 19th century; for example, with

the later Hunter Commission in 1882 when Muslims were provided with special educational facilities and reservations in jobs for backward areas that ignited the Hindu community against Muslims. In the same period, religion-based social movements emerged across the region; for example, Hindu movements through Arya and Brahmmo Samaj, a Muslim uprising known as the Ulema Movement, a Shikh uprising in Panjab, and Christian uprisings in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Although these all began as social movements, they were soon politicized and turned towards communal violence. Gould holds that such conflicts were not just expression of religious anxieties; they also represented attempts by powerful people to substantiate their claims of being genuine representatives of the Muslim and Hindu communities. He further argues that Congress, although established as a secular party, contained religious biases. Gould shows how leaders of Congress at the regional and local levels were supportive of communal politics, despite the secular rhetoric of the national leadership.

In the beginning of the 20th century, the religio-politics of the Indian subcontinent took a more violent turn through the *Shawdeshi* Movement based on Hindu nationalism and Pan-Islamic propaganda, itself based on Aligar and Deobandi *Mufties* that ended in Hindu-Muslim communal violence. Gould argues that these societal polarizations were not only just about colonial policies but also the function of emerging group of educated, elite politicians who intentionally sought to exploit issues around caste and religion to demonstrate their mass support.

In the 1940s, Gould claims that politicians used the print media to highlight their representation of numerous communities and started to set up caste and religious-based organizations that offered them more space to mobilize community and reinforced the significance of communal identities in the public sphere. Language, literature and music were brought under the range of communal political mobilizations. Even Gandhi was accused of harming Muslim

interests by undermining Urdu despite his reputation for bolstering religious equality.

While narrating partition politics and post-partition communal catastrophe, Gould provides a unique comparative approach in historiography between 'high politics' of 1947 and 1971. He contends that during partition in 1947, M A Jinnah was backed into a corner by some Congress leaders whose interests increasingly dovetailed with those of British negotiators eager to decolonize swiftly. Similarly, in 1971, the creation of Bangladesh was buttressed by some influential, elite Panjabi politicians who expected to benefit through the birth of Bangladesh. Gould holds that post-partition communal violence occurred not because of the nature of religious ideologies, nor for solely creating two nations; rather, it came about due to the representative political parties' radical nationalistic campaigns against each other and the failure of leadership to handle the immediate challenges of nation building. Moreover, in spite of the creation of two new nations, the colonial administration, police, and judiciary remained unchanged, which fueled the violence as they reportedly assisted local mobs in communal violence in some areas. Two fundamental causes of communalism in Post-colonial South Asia are outlined by Gould: first, the experience of partition violence, and second, that the constitutional rights set out in the 1950s didn't prevent the continuous reference to religious community in everyday mobilizations.

One of the fundamental goals of Gould's research on religion and conflict in South Asia is to disclose how, even in modern democratic states, religion and caste identities are used to mobilize people for political gains in different parts of the region. He attempts to show this through the historical legacy of communal violence that societies have carried on for years.

From 1970 onwards, the revival of communal violence emerged as a big concern in South Asia. Gould offers very impressive reflections on this crisis. To Gould, the failure of India's Congress-led government to fulfill its promises and prevent economic

143

downturn both paved the way to a strengthened Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the later outgrowth of their Hindu nationalism, nationalism that fueled the 1992 Hindu-Muslim conflict and the infamous 2002 Gujrat massacre and called into question the secular look of the nation. In both Bangladesh and Pakistan, moreover, the Islamization of politics under two military rulers, Ziaur Rahman and Ziaul Hoque, and their conscious use of Islam for legitimization, gave the Islamic parties political space that ultimately fired religio-political conflicts. Furthermore, the proliferation of *madrasha* education funded by Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf states pushed both Pakistan and Bangladesh to the challenge of Islamic radicalism. Gould claims that these *madrashas* are used to train Taliban and promote radical violence. In post-colonial Sri Lanka, structural violence against Tamils -- for instance, denying them linguistic, political and primordial ethnographic representations, educational deprivation, ritualistic heresy, and so forth -- led to organized violence in the 1980s that later turned into a long and traumatic civil war. Gould claims that the political mobilization of Buddhist monks on one side, and political deprivation of Tamils on the other, contributed more to civil war than Buddhist religious ideology.

Religion and Conflict in Modern South Asia contends that religion itself hasn't led to major communal conflicts in South Asia; rather, blame lies with the nature of state formation and political representation that fuels such conflicts. William Gould convincingly vindicates his thesis through his historical narrations from late 19th century to contemporary religio-political conflicts. Gould rightly notes that in many instances of officially defined communal conflict, communalities were rarely led, although background political actors may have played a role in provoking conflicts. This book should prove valuable to scholars and others interested in South Asia, and will accelerate public debate as well as comparative research across South Asia in the future. Hence, Ward Berenschot's comment on the immediate response to the book seems worthwhile as he says, "while conflict and violence have been preferred topics for social scientists

studying South Asia, no one has attempted such a broad comparative study of the persistence of religious conflict during two tumultuous centuries."[1]

Reviewed by
Md. Mizanur Rahman
Department of International Relations
South Asian University, New Delhi.

---

[1] Berenschot, Ward (2012), Violence and Representation, *The Book Review Library Trust*, Volume XXXVI Number 12 December 2012.